

Probers Find No Negligence in Sylmar Brush Fire Fatal to 12

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A panel of experts investigating the 12 deaths in the November Sylmar brush fire announced Tuesday it found "no evidence of negligence" but recommended a number of changes in fire fighting "to prevent similar tragedies in the future."

The panel, headed by Hamilton K. Pyles, deputy chief of the U.S. Forest Service, reported "decisions and actions" which claimed the lives of 12 El Cariso Hot Shot crewmen on Nov. 1 point to the following needs:

"1—More specific direction on safe practices in similar topography. Make crystal clear that a chimney, narrow box canyon or similar terrain is a hazard area even if devoid of fuel."

(The trapped fire fighters were working along the fire's edge down into the head of a steep, rocky chimney canyon.)

"2—Provide a physical checklist for downhill line operations whereby such an operation would be done only when all critical factors are aligned favorably and checked off on the list.

"3—Improve intelligence by helicopter and on-the-ground scouting at all critical points in the fire area, particularly where two crews are working toward each other.

"4—Increase the use of better communication facilities between fire-fighting crews."

In its analysis the panel emphasized from all that can be deter-

mined "there was no evidence of negligence, disobedience or carelessness based on present standards and practices."

Surviving members of the 25-man Hot Shot crew detailed their actions to the time of the fatal flareup to the 5-man panel.

The "Green Beret," elite crew from Cleveland National Forest in Riverside County told how the fire flashed through the 2,200-foot-long chimney canyon in less than a minute.

"The wind was from the south-east, favorable to holding the fire," the report stated.

"It appeared that the crew would have no trouble extending its control line to meet a Los Angeles County crew plainly visible below. But at 3:30 p.m. the county crew was stopped by a steep-sided gully.

"Hot Shot crew Supt. Gordon King apparently decided that the quickest and safest way to control the fire was to tie in with 300 feet of natural firebreaks and build about 200 feet of control line through unburned brush.

"To do this would have taken King's crew an estimated 15 minutes.

"But at 3:35 p.m. the fire direction changed due to topographic influence and surprised King and his crew. The fire ran up the slope. Before the crew could take cover fire swept up the chimney canyon and enveloped the men."